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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the evolution of interlibrary lending (ILL) activities in Hong Kong and answers the following frequently asked questions using the City University of Hong Kong as an example: (1) Who may use the service? (2) How do the users submit their requests? (3) How about charges? (4) Who are the major overseas document suppliers for University Grants Committee (UGC) libraries in Hong Kong? (5) Are there any union catalogs in Hong Kong? (6) How are requests transmitted to the potential supplying libraries? (7) How are the ILL items delivered between the requesting and supplying libraries? (8) What is the percentage of ILL requests filled by overseas sources? and (9) Are there any consortium-wide ILL systems or networks in Hong Kong? (MES)

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Interlibrary lending activities in Hong Kong - an overview

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Abstract

Interlibrary lending (ILL) is a time-honoured activity among the university libraries in Hong Kong. With information explosion, proliferating amount of published materials, soaring prices of monographs and serials subscriptions as well as tightening budgets, the role of ILL in supplying research materials to meet the needs of the staff and students becomes more and more important. It is the aim of this paper to review the evolution of ILL activities in Hong Kong and, at the same time, to answer some of the questions that outsiders may find interesting by using the City University of Hong Kong as an example.

Paper

The Evolution

Interlibrary lending (ILL) is a time-honoured activity in Hong Kong libraries. Its history may be traced back to the 1960s when the Hong Kong Library Association, established in 1958, ordered standard ILL forms from the American Library Association and sold them to member libraries to encourage them to practise interlibrary lending. From that time onwards, ILL has always been a major co-operative activity among libraries in Hong Kong. The role of ILL in Hong Kong, especially among the university libraries, is undeniably very significant. This is also in line with the observation made by James Thompson and Reg Carr (1987, p.213) that "*of all the types of co-operative activity, interlibrary lending is the most important, the most common and certainly, as far as library users are concerned, the most evidently productive*".

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The basic rationale behind ILL activities is that "*no library, no matter how large and how well-endowed it is, can ever hope to possess every single publication that its readers want; however, what a library does not have may be available in another*" (Poon, 1998, p.1). It is with this rationale that, back in the 1970s, libraries of the three publicly funded higher education institutions in Hong Kong, namely, the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the then Polytechnic of Hong Kong, sent messengers to each other to collect and exchange ILL materials among themselves on a weekly basis.

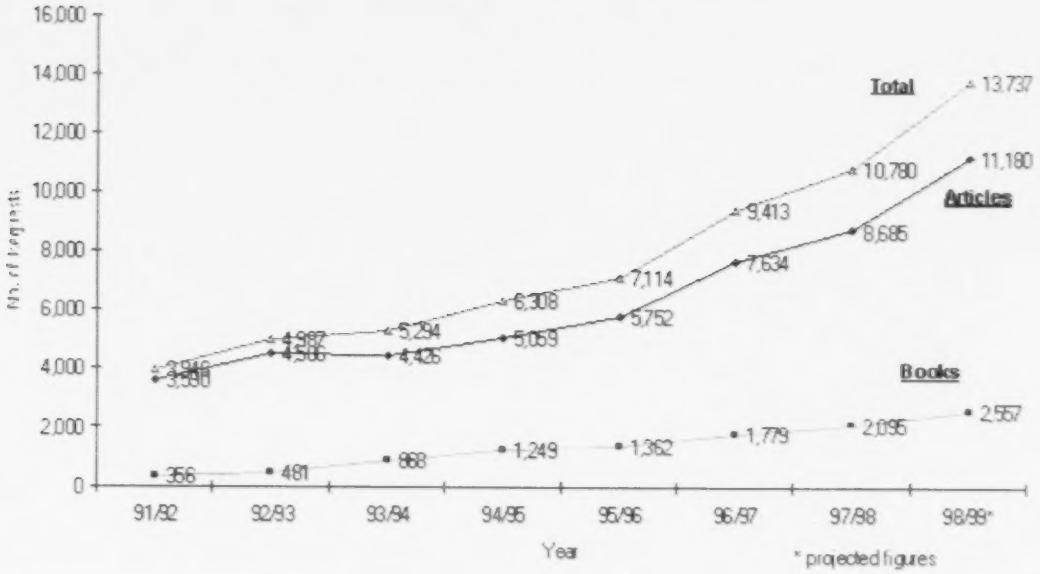
Up till now, as a result of Government's policy to expand higher education, there are totally eight university and colleges in Hong Kong (1), all under the aegis of the University Grants Committee (UGC). ILL activities are still being carried on among the UGC libraries, but with increased volumes and importance as well as different modes of operations. The reasons for ILL operations, such as information explosion, proliferating amount of published materials, soaring prices of monographs and serials subscriptions as well as tightening budgets have been well-covered in library literature. University libraries in Hong Kong are not immune from these problems and ILL has become an essential activity.

The volume of ILL transactions in those halcyon days was definitely of no comparison to that of the present. For example, during 1984-1987, the first triennium after the City University of Hong Kong (CityU) was set up, its Library processed on average some 2,000 internal ILL requests for its eligible users in each financial year. By 1991/92, however, there were some 4,000 requests processed. In 1995/96, the figure reached 7,000 and in 1997/98, it was well over 10,000. It is projected that by the end of the current financial year, the number of internal ILL requests processed by the CityU Library will probably reach 13,700. (*see Figure 1*)

At the same time, the number of external ILL requests that CityU Library processed for the other UGC libraries has also increased. In 1991/92, the figure was just slightly over 1,000. By 1995/96, it was well over 4,000. It is projected that by the end of 1998/99, the figure will likely be over 6,000. (see Figure 2)

It is obvious that UGC libraries in Hong Kong are more and more reliant on ILL to meet the needs of their users. At present, every university library has its own ILL unit or section to handle all the ILL transactions. These ILL units and sections work very closely together with the common goal of supplying useful research materials to their users in the most efficient and cost-effective way. Outsiders may be interested to know how ILL is operated and practised in Hong Kong, especially among the university libraries. The following is an attempt to answer some of the frequently asked questions, using the Library of the City University of Hong Kong as an example.

Figure 1
No. of ILL requests processed by CityU Library for its eligible users
Internal Requests (Books vs. Articles)



The Current Practice

Who may use the service?
In Hong Kong, ILL services are usually provided to academic and research staff as well as postgraduate students only since it is believed that the needs of undergraduates should be met by each institute's own library collections.

How do the users submit their requests?
Apart from printed ILL request forms, most of the UGC libraries in Hong Kong, including CityU, are also making available online ILL request forms to their users as well. In this way, ILL requests can be submitted electronically and this provides much convenience to the part-time students. Moreover, quite a number of commercial electronic databases provide built-in ILL forms within their databases so that users can submit ILL requests to their own libraries while conducting searches. For example, users of the CityU Library can submit ILL requests while searching the Ovid and CSA databases.

How about the charges?
ILL items supplied by local university libraries are free of charge as all the UGC libraries have agreed that they will not charge among themselves. It is believed that the supply and demand of ILL items among themselves would be more or less balanced at the end. Requests that cannot be fulfilled locally will be sent to overseas suppliers upon the consent of the requesters. Overseas suppliers, of course, will charge for the supply of documents. Different university libraries have different policies as to whether they will absorb the costs for their users. In the case of the CityU Library, the costs for obtaining photocopies of journal articles from overseas sources are absorbed by the Library with a designated budget for that purpose. However, as for overseas book loans, departments have to bear the costs for requests raised by their staff and students as overseas book loan services are usually rather expensive both in terms of transactional and administrative costs. Unless the books concerned are out of print, the Library would, however, prefer acquiring the items instead.

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Who are the major overseas document suppliers for UGC libraries in Hong Kong?
British Library is the major overseas document supplier for UGC libraries in Hong Kong. Almost all the university libraries have deposit accounts with the British Library. Another major document supplier for the CityU Library is OCLC. Other occasional suppliers include Uncover, UMI, Derwent Patent, AskIEEE and individual academic and national libraries from countries like Australia, Canada, China, France, Japan, Taiwan and so on.

Are there any union catalogues in Hong Kong?
To ensure that users can obtain their requested items within the shortest time and at the least costs, it is the responsibility of the library staff to locate exactly where the requested items are available. Currently, all UGC libraries are using INNOPAC and the OPAC systems of the eight institutes are linked together by HARNET (the Hong Kong Academic and Research NETwork). Compared to the days before INNOPAC, the task of checking the availability of requested items among UGC libraries is now much easier. With Z39.50 software, broadcast searches cutting across all the eight OPAC systems are possible although the reliability of Z39.50 is still sometimes a question. However, in a sense, there is now a virtual union catalogue among the eight UGC libraries so as to facilitate interlibrary lending operations.

How are requests transmitted to the potential supplying libraries?
For potential suppliers in Hong Kong, requests are faxed to them. Fax transmission is convenient and cost-effective as request forms are printed out almost instantly from the fax machines without library staff's intervention being required. Moreover, fax transmission within Hong Kong will not incur any IDD costs.

As for overseas suppliers, requests are usually transmitted electronically via email or through the dedicated transmission systems of the suppliers wherever possible. The CityU Library, for example, is sending requests to the British Library via ARTEmail, to the OCLC via its PRISM ILL system and to Uncover via UnCoverWeb.

How are the ILL items delivered between the requesting and supplying libraries?
The Joint University Libraries Advisory Committee (JULAC), comprising the Chief Librarians of the eight universities and colleges, signs a contract with the DHL Intracity Express Limited every year so that the courier company provides point to point pick-up and delivery service for ILL items among the eight university libraries every day. For articles that are requested urgently, the copies are faxed to the requesting libraries. In fact, quite a number of the UGC libraries are Ariel users and images of articles can also be emailed to the requesting libraries.

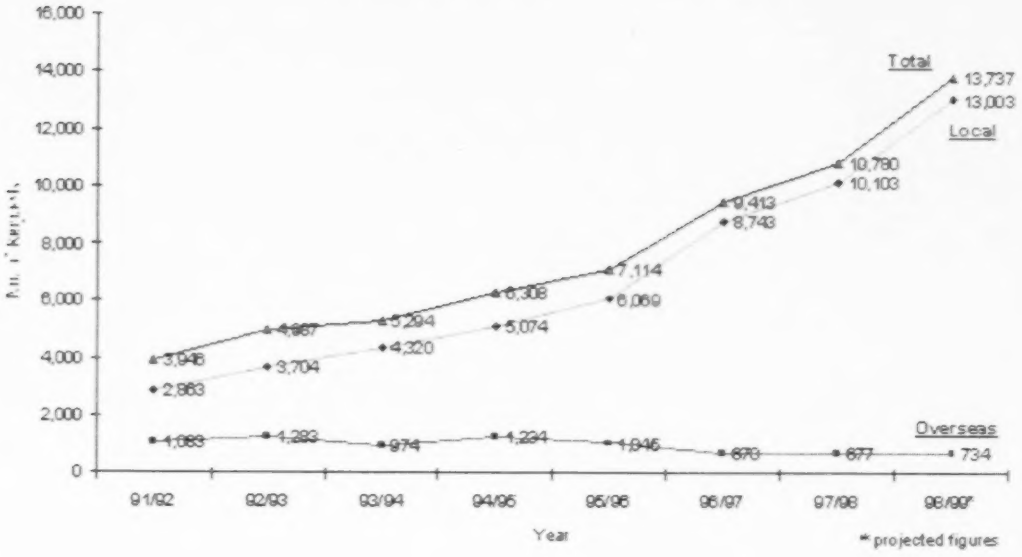
What is the percentage of ILL requests filled by overseas sources?
The majority of the ILL requests are filled locally. Moreover, there is a trend that the reliance on overseas sources is diminishing. In the case of the CityU Library, although more and more internal ILL requests are processed each year, the percentage of them being filled by overseas sources is actually decreasing. In 1995/96, 1,045 out of the 7,114 requests were filled by overseas sources; however, by 1997/98, there were only 677 requests filled by overseas sources. (*see Figure 3*)

One possible reason for this phenomenon is the availability of full-text electronic databases. Quite a number of requests, which would previously not be filled locally, are now readily available in databases such as ProQuest Direct, Science Direct, EBSCOhost and so on. However, it is interesting to note that even with a portion of the demand met by full-text electronic databases, the number of ILL requests still show a net increase.

Requests submitted by users via the online ILL forms available on the Library's Web page are downloaded onto the system and this saves library staff re-inputting the requests again. Citations of individual requests are reformatted into ARTEmail format automatically for further transmission to British Library.

Do the UGC libraries in Hong Kong supply ILL items to overseas libraries?

Figure 3
No.of ILL requests processed by CityU Library for its eligible users
Internal Requests (Local vs. Overseas)



Different libraries have different policies. In the case of the CityU Library, requests for photocopying of journal articles from overseas libraries will be entertained free of charge. However, so far, not too many requests of that kind have been received.

Are there any consortium-wide ILL systems or networks in Hong Kong?
There are no consortium-wide ILL systems or networks available in Hong Kong. At present, the interlibrary loan automation systems of UGC libraries are totally independent. The systems are mainly in-house databases developed by library staff themselves and they are not integrated with one another in any sense. Although all the UGC libraries are currently using INNOPAC, none of them uses the INNOPAC ILL module as, somehow, its functionalities just do not fit the needs of libraries in Hong Kong. It is hoped that with further improvements and fine-tuning, the INNOPAC ILL module can help create a consortium-wide document delivery system in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

It is obvious that none of the UGC libraries can ever think of meeting the needs of their users on their own. Resource sharing is a must as proven by the increasing number of ILL requests. The mechanism for the ILL practice among the UGC libraries in Hong Kong has worked quite well. However, there is still room for improvement. To start with, a consortium-wide ILL or document delivery system in Hong Kong should be attempted. An integrated system similar to OhioLINK may save the libraries the resources now spent on intermediating the ILL operations. With good will and commitment, the author believes that libraries in Hong Kong should be able to achieve more.

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Footnotes

1. The 8 universities and colleges are: City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Lingnan College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong and University of Hong Kong.

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